



## BBC Trust Review of Network Speech Radio, BBC Audience Council Northern Ireland Advice to the Review, March 2015

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**BBC Trust Review of Network Speech Radio**  
**BBC Audience Council Northern Ireland**  
**Advice to the Review**

## **1. Introduction**

This paper summarises the early insights of the Audience Council Northern Ireland for the Trust's review of network speech radio services. It particularly aims to capture the questions and themes for audiences which might be helpful for the Trust to explore in the ongoing review (underlined in the text).

The Council's insights are summarised in two sections – for Radio 4 and 4 Extra, and then Radio 5 live and 5 Live Sports Extra, recognising the distinctive offers and audiences for these stations. However, there are some common themes, such as how changes in technology and consumption patterns impact on audiences of the future. A third section describes the evidence base that the Audience Council has drawn on.

## **2. Radio 4 and Radio 4 extra**

**Summary :** Overall, we heard that Radio 4 is regarded as a very distinctive service, offering high quality content and making significant contributions to the delivery of the BBC's Public Purposes. Generally, the station meets its service remit and there is little audience appetite for radical change. Radio 4 Extra is not well known in NI and may be a service which could be delivered online, if this were to help protect the wider speech radio offer.

Feedback to the Audience Council suggests a number of areas which the Trust might explore further to understand how the two services could be further enhanced and develop in the future. Key areas include:

- Understanding how new audiences will come to speech radio, in the context of major changes in technology and consumption patterns
- What value there would be in developing new pathways into content beyond the linear brand
- What value might be derived from developing the online/digital offer, and what direction this might take
- Expectations of reflecting and engaging with diverse audiences around the UK
- How to protect the value and distinctiveness of Radio 4 in the face of further resource constraints
- Whether there are any enduring changes in audience perceptions of BBC impartiality in news and current affairs coverage, in response to a changing UK (as for network news and current affairs generally)

## **The main themes of feedback are noted below:**

**A loyal base of listeners:** The feedback we received indicates that Radio 4 has a very loyal base of listeners who rely on the station for intelligent, high quality and interesting programmes that they would not be able to find elsewhere. For many people Radio 4 is a regular part of their day, and some listeners described it as 'a constant companion' through day and night.

**Quality and distinctiveness:** Markers of quality and distinctiveness include the range of programmes and topics, the intelligent and engaging approach, the depth of analysis and breadth of opinion, and the UK-wide and international perspective. Words used to describe Radio 4 included:

*excellent, high quality*  
*unique, original*  
*intelligent, authoritative, solid*  
*variety, range*  
*engaging*  
*educative, informative, in depth*  
*global, international, outward looking*

Listeners spoke of the station's role in stimulating their minds and broadening their horizons:

*"It keeps you engaged and learning from it."*

*"It broadens my mind and extends my perspectives and horizons."*

*"Radio 4 should touch your life and make you think about something .. it helps you broaden your perspectives and understanding."*

Linen Hall Library, Belfast, September 2014

Innovation was not a word that appeared to be readily associated with the station. Listeners appear to expect content that is stretching in its intellectual qualities, range depth and insight, rather than distinctly novel in its approach. The Audience Council would be interested in wider audience expectations of innovative content and whether these are met.

**Presentation style:** We heard that presentation style and the contribution of individual presenters is very important to Radio 4 listeners. Presenters were described as empathetic, knowledgeable, and able to make topics interesting, reflecting the qualities of the station. Many people could name presenters that they particularly liked to listen to.

*"Radio 4 has a gem of presenters who are calm and polite."*

Portstewart, September 2015

*"Intonation can make content interesting, and knowledge is very important."*

Linen Hall Library, Belfast, September 2014

**Discovery:** Although many people tuned in for favourite programmes, the value of discovery is also very apparent, especially for factual programmes. Many listeners trust Radio 4 to know them well enough to be able to lead them into new topics in engaging ways:

*"It's different from TV, there is more discovery. I have stumbled on some wonderful comedy."*

Portstewart, September 2014

*"I tune in at times when I am fed up with Radio Ulster. I have never yet found whatever happens to be on of no interest."*

Ballymoney and Dalriada Probus Groups, May 2014

*"...a whole programme on the theme of one word – waiting. It was fascinating – who would have thought it."*

Knock Ladies' Probus Group, Belfast, October 2014

Short form programmes are particularly valuable in this respect.

**News and current affairs:** This genre stood out as the central element of the offer for most listeners that we spoke with. If there are to be more scope changes because of reduced resources this is the area that they think should, above all, not be diminished. Listeners appreciate the breadth and depth of analysis and the range of voices. Impartiality is prized, and expected, by listeners – the vast majority of those we spoke with considered that the station delivered on this essential requirement and indeed added value within the portfolio through its range and depth.

*"Radio 4 provides a broad and deep analysis of current affairs."*

*"Sometimes news tries to squeeze things into half an hour, but you need time for discussion with no constraints on contributors, giving them time to speak .. Radio 4 is good at this."*

Community Service Volunteers media trainees, October 2014

*"We live and die by the Today programme."*

Portstewart, September 2014

That said, we heard a few voices that suggest that perceptions and expectations of impartiality may be changing for some people, to reflect the evolving nature of the UK. For example, we heard that some younger audiences tend to associate the station with unionism in respect of the Scotland independence referendum, perhaps because of perceptions that it is more connected with audiences in the south east of England and its traditional focus on Westminster, and/or in contrast to the approach and diversity of views in other news sources they consume.

*"I thought the BBC was slanted towards pro-Union on the Scottish referendum and others I know felt the same. BBC coverage came across as status quo is right and deviation from that is wrong."*

Community Service Volunteers media trainees, October 2014

We suggest that this is a theme which the Trust might consider exploring further on behalf of licence fee payers, to understand if there are enduring changes in perceptions of impartiality - although we understand that will be outside the scope of this particular review.

The station's high performance, and unique contribution, to BBC news and current affairs means that audience expectations are also very high, and some listeners identified areas where they saw room for further improvement. These include:

- scope for a wider range and diversity of voices, where Radio 4's contribution and importance to on air diversity was particularly noted (and noting the Trust's helpful work in its Breath of Opinion Impartiality Review)

- newsgathering to cast its net more widely geographically, with more stories, insights, developments and illustrations from the different parts of the UK
- the need to better reflect the changing nature of the UK through comparisons of public policy in the different nations, and a wider range of stories, voices and perspectives
- perceptions that some flagship current affairs programmes or presenters are unduly adversarial or aggressive in their interviews

These issues are explored in more depth in the Audience Council's submission to the Trust's review of Network News and Current Affairs which can be found at the following link, so they are not repeated in detail here.

[http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/acni/networknewsca\\_2013\\_submission.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/acni/networknewsca_2013_submission.pdf)

The Audience Council was pleased to see many of these issues reflected in the Trust's conclusions to the network news review and asks that the Trust continues to monitor audience expectations and management progress against these. It particularly asks that more is done to reflect the changing nature of the UK through comparisons of public policy in different nations, as well as a wider range of voices and views.

**Factual:** Factual programming is also highly appreciated and Radio 4 is seen as the natural home for this genre on radio. Audiences reflected on the wide range of programmes – eg arts and culture, history, business and the economy, science, philosophy, religion and ethics, health etc - and Radio 4's distinct ability to make these appealing to its wider audience.

Special seasons and short form programmes add further value in this respect.

*"Who would have thought that the history of the Post Office would be so appealing?"*

*"I never knew penguins could be so interesting!"*

*"For me it was the programme on grave digging – I never imagined!"*

Knock Ladies' Probus Group, October 2014

The only gap which some people identified across network speech radio was round business and the economy – where there was some appetite for more content within news and current affairs as well as separate programmes. It may be helpful for the Trust to understand whether this view is shared more widely.

**World affairs:** There was marked appreciation for Radio 4's international outlook, particularly through news and factual programmes, such as *From Our Own Correspondent*. This significantly adds to the appreciation of the station's distinctive offer, drawing on the unique capacity and qualities of the BBC with its network of global reporters. The Audience Council is interested to understand if there are more synergies between the station and the World Service, as the latter's offer for UK audiences develops.

**Drama:** Drama is well established and valued by Radio 4 listeners, and there is appreciation that the station plays a unique role in this respect. The audience welcomes the commitment to nurture new writing, production and acting talent. We heard that some dramas can be difficult for the casual listener to appreciate, especially if they tune in part way, but this did seem a view of much less regular listeners and for others the time slots are more established and work well.

**Comedy:** Comedy on Radio 4 was highly prized by many, and again there was an appreciation that Radio 4 plays a special role in supporting this genre on radio and as a platform for developing formats that may migrate to TV. Naturally, tastes are very subjective, and most people found programmes that appealed and others that did not within a wide range of programmes. The station's success lies in serving the range of tastes at some points in the schedule. Also, when prompted, listeners appreciated the value added by investing in new talent and formats, even though this meant that some would be more successful than others. Overall, we consider that Radio 4's commitment to comedy is valued and important, and that this requires considerable space and investment.

We heard from a selection of lighter users and younger audiences who were interested in radio comedy but unaware of Radio 4's offer. We ask that the Trust explores whether this is one area where the station could reach a wider audience in some instances.

**Resource challenges:** We are conscious that BBC Radio continues to make essential savings which may result in further scope changes for network speech radio. We therefore particularly ask the Trust to consider audience expectations and public value in relation to comedy and drama as genres that are not well served in the market, and to understand what investment is appropriate to deliver on these. Audiences do not appear to have noticed any negative impact from DQF savings at this stage, but are keen to protect the service from cuts that would impact on its core attributes of quality, range and depth.

**Reflecting the Nations, regions and communities of the UK:** There was wide debate about how well Radio 4 contributes to the Public Purpose. A wide variety of listeners that we spoke with thought that Radio 4 was too metro centric or focused on the SE of England in its approach and did not do enough in volume and range of its programmes to reflect the diversity of audiences and the nature of citizenship across the UK, including Northern Ireland. In particular, audiences consider that more could be done to gather news stories from across the UK and to illuminate UK-wide issues through comparisons of different policy and practice in the four UK nations, across the range of devolved areas (see also news and current affairs). For some people this tone was set by the Today programme, with its focus on Westminster.

*"Radio 4 is quite centralised and high brow. It could do more to reflect other areas of the UK. There is an important balance to strike and at the moment it is on the English side of things, For example, there hasn't been anything about Wales in weeks – just lots about Scotland in the run up to the referendum."*

Journalism students, University of Ulster, Coleraine, October 2014

*"Unless you listen to local radio you don't get anything relevant to here ... other BBC radio stations haven't thought about Northern Ireland."*

Armagh, May 2014

However, many others valued the station for its focus on issues which are relevant across the whole of the UK, rather than bringing specifically local issues to a wider audience:

*"It is global and allows communities to come together."*

*"It has a feel of the UK in the world, rather than the UK in its parts."*

Portstewart, September 2014

*"It is an escape from the local"* Knock Ladies Probus Group, October 2014

We note that there is little appetite for a parochial service or one which aggregates regional content: listeners thought that nations' and local radio services fulfilled the remit for local content. However, there was strong interest in the station doing more to reflect UK-wide

themes through perspectives and voices from around the UK. In particular, listeners thought that Radio 4 (and other BBC services) has a responsibility to provide a wider and more authentic portrayal of Northern Ireland, including the more positive aspects of life in this community.

*"We know people in Great Britain who, like us, listen to Radio 4 for news and factual programmes but still have an impression of NI that is vastly outdated."*

Knock Ladies Probus Group, Belfast, October 2014

Some feedback recognised improvements in recent years in terms of the range and frequency of stories and voices from NI. Nevertheless, there is a marked view among many listeners that more can and should be done to reflect the whole of the UK, to resonate with a wider and more diverse audience, to better serve the Public Purposes and to enhance the offer for the whole audience. It would be helpful if the Trust could explore audience expectations of Radio 4 reflecting and engaging with diverse audiences around the UK.

**Audience reach in NI:** We are aware that Radio 4 has a significantly lower audience reach in Northern Ireland than the UK as a whole. However, this reflects, at least in part, the popularity of Radio Ulster/Foyle among the target age range, and we are broadly content that audiences here are served within the portfolio of BBC radio services. That said, we suggest that some audiences would be better served by BBC radio if they were more aware of content that might appeal to them on services that they don't use. We would like Radio Ulster/Foyle to do more to promote occasional, carefully identified, opportunities for audiences to tune into Radio 4 and see what it has to offer them, so that listeners can be more aware of their choices across the speech radio portfolio. Joint projects such as *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, and World War One commemorations, can be particularly helpful in this respect.

**Replenisher audiences:** Many of the older audiences we spoke with talked about how they gravitated towards Radio 4 as they got older. However, feedback from younger generations - from teens to some of those in their 40s - suggests that it can no longer be taken for granted that this will be the case in the future as technology and consumption patterns have changed so much. We suggest that it will be particularly important for the Trust to understand how network speech radio, including Radio 4, will replenish its audience in the future, taking account of new technology, consumption patterns, content preferences and how content is promoted and discovered.

**Perceptions of the station, accessibility:** For some people the station's high brow, intellectual and 'posh' image was off-putting, although others suggested that, although the station has this image, its content was accessible and stimulating, intelligent but not elite. Quite a few people we spoke with, in the target age range, were put off altogether by Radio 4's reputation as 'white, middle class, and English'.

*"All presenters sound the same ... they have the same voice."*

*"The presenters don't bring any variety to the show, only contributors bring variety. There should be more regional voices."*

*"All the presenters are very posh ... even if they are from NI, it's posh NI."*

Community Service Volunteers media trainees, September 2014

There was marked appreciation when listeners noticed an improvement in the diversity of voices, and Radio 4 is expected to play a particular role in this respect:

*"Women are largely underrepresented in the media generally, including newspapers. It's brilliant that they listened to audience complaints about presenters all being white, middle-aged men – Mishal Husain has made a huge difference on the Today programme."*

Post-graduate journalism students, University of Ulster, Coleraine

We ask whether these views are reflective of wider audience perceptions and if so, whether they are informed by the reputation of the station, or could be addressed by changes to content and presentation, such as a wider range of voices. We also wonder whether there are instances in which the brand is a barrier to content that could have wider appeal, particularly to the replenisher audience.

**New pathways into content:** We also heard from some younger audiences eg in their 20s and 30s who enjoyed some Radio 4 content (eg news and current affairs, factual content and comedy), somewhat in spite of the station's reputation as a place for the more mature listener. There seems to be an untapped younger audience for quality speech radio, particularly comedy, if only that audience was aware it was there and recognised it as something for them.

*"If you give it a chance and get past any preconceptions, you would really like it. I have a friend who is 20 and loves Radio 4, especially the comedy."*

*"I always thought it was high brow and middle-aged, but it is really interesting – I liked it."*  
Community Service Volunteer media students, September 2014

*"The voices are the same .. older voices. I've assumed they are talking to their own age group and that the station is for older adults."*

Post-graduate journalism students, University of Ulster, Coleraine, October 2014

*"because I flick through channels, I am not always sure what I am listening to. I stumbled onto Radio 4 by accident and came across a drama about a man who was being made redundant ... it was really interesting, I had never heard about drama on radio before that – I didn't know it existed."* North West Regional College students, October 2014

We think it will be very important to understand what value there would be in providing new pathways into speech radio content for audiences who are unlikely to go there through the Radio 4 linear brand. We heard of a strong appetite for more creative digital curation, personalisation and targeted promotion through social media so audiences can find the content that appeals to them, regardless of channel.

*"There's a big question about how people find programmes. I would never hear about Radio 4."* North West Regional College, October 2014

*"You Tube works well ... you just search and listen."*  
Community Service Volunteers Media Trainees, September 2014

It would also be helpful to understand if the full benefits of cross promotion are being realised. On the one hand, there is clearly a limit to the proportion of trails and promotional content that audiences will accept, and listeners do not want to be bombarded with trails for programmes that do not interest them personally. However, we have also heard audiences describe the BBC services as silos, each working to drive up its own audiences rather than working to build potentially greater audience value across the portfolio. It would be helpful to understand if there are more opportunities in this regard.



*"It's interesting to see that each service is distinct ... they are little fiefdoms of their own. Each station, even each programme, promotes itself but you would never hear them coming together or promoting each other."*

Armagh, May 2014

We are very aware, however, that the core Radio 4 audience does not want the quality, intelligence and range of the station to be compromised in order to reach a wider audience. There is little appetite for radical change to the service.

*"Keep Radio 4 pure and original"*

*"Don't compromise the intellectual quality to reach a wide audience."*

*"Don't change Radio 4 to reach young people. You'll just create another Radio 1."*

North West Regional College Students, October 2014

The feedback we received suggests that the greatest benefits in terms of broadening the audience may be derived by creating new pathways into content for a wider and more diverse replenisher audience, and doing more to reflect the diversity of audiences around the UK, rather than trying to make content more accessible in terms of its intellectual demands and depth.

**Radio 4 Extra:** We noted very low levels of awareness of Radio 4 extra among audiences in Northern Ireland. This may be partly informed by low coverage, although listeners also cited cost and lack of awareness of DAB and confidence with new technology as barriers to take up.

However, for some people DAB had opened up new options for listening :

*"Having DAB in my car has really extended my listening, for example to Radio 4 Extra and 5 live sports extra."*

Armagh, May 2014

The few people we spoke with who did listen to 4 Extra appreciated the quality of the offer, particularly in respect of access to much loved archive programmes. However, it was interesting that more of the people we spoke to thought that the 4 Extra content could be made available as an online service, so that savings could be used to protect or enhance the offer on the main channels, ie Radio 4 and 5 live. The Audience Council thinks that there may be a stronger case to consider this as the proportion of origination on 4 Extra reduces in favour of more archive content. It asks the Trust to explore whether the wider speech radio audience would agree, and what benefits they would expect to see as a result of any savings.

**Children's radio:** The Audience Council welcomed the Trust's approval in September 2014 of the decision to stop broadcasting children's radio on Radio 4 Extra, and invest some of the money saved in children's audio online. This reflects the Audience Council's advice to the Trust's review of BBC Children's services (at the following link) when it noted the negligible audience among children for the 4 Extra service, as well as the public value that could be derived from children's audio in more convenient formats, such as on demand through mobile devices.

[http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/acni/acni\\_childrens\\_services\\_2013.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/acni/acni_childrens_services_2013.pdf)

The Council asks the Trust to monitor the development and uptake of children's audio to ensure that the benefits to this young audience are fully realised.

**Online offer:** The Radio 4 and 4 Extra websites did not seem to be used by audiences we spoke with, many of whom were not aware of, or interested in, going online for more information or content. Some older members of the Radio 4 audience told us that they need

more help to take advantage of these opportunities, or feel they just are not ready for them. We are also aware of sections of the audience who do not have good access to broadband or digital devices. Many older people depend on written listings, in newspapers and magazines, to plan their listening. A number of them felt that the radio listings were not given enough prominence and space in listings, and we heard that access to listings is a particular issue for people with a visual impairment.

That said, we heard that podcasts are highly valued by those who are more technically proficient and have good broadband access. The iPlayer Radio app was not well known, but greatly appreciated by those who had discovered it, some of whom said it transformed the way they listened to radio. We have heard frustrations about inconsistent or confusing access to radio programmes on catch up, for example episodes missing from the middle of a series in spite of older editions being available; confusion between what's on catch up and what's available on demand. The extension of the catch up window to 30 days is welcomed.

We also heard of a strong appetite from online users for better ways to help them find content that would be of interest to them, without having to search through channels and programme names eg keyword searches for contributors and topics, better personalisation and curation etc. We are highly aware of growing expectations among audiences (and not just the very youngest groups, but also the 30s and 40s) for more digitally enhanced content, rather than using online predominantly as a source of further information in text form.

We think it would be helpful for the Trust to understand if more value could be derived from the stations' online/digital offers, what direction this should take, and whether this would help to build a replenisher audience without diminishing the offer for the core group, including those with less access or appetite for the new technology.

### **3. Radio 5 Live and 5 live sports extra**

Overall, we heard that Radio 5 live is regarded as a distinctive and high quality service and for many listeners it is a staple of their media consumption across the week. It generally meets its service remit and audiences do not seek major changes, although they have suggested some ways in which they think the station's offer could be further enhanced. 5 live sports extra is less appealing in NI where DAB access and take up are issues for some.

Feedback to the Audience Council suggests a number of areas which the Trust might explore further to understand how the two services could be further enhanced and develop in the future. Key areas include:

- (As for speech radio generally) understanding how new audiences will come to speech radio, in the context of massive changes in technology and consumption patterns
- Whether the range of sports on 5 live reflects audience expectations and the BBC's unique role
- The extent to which Radio 5 live has a 'blokey' image which may put off some audiences; and, if so, how this might be addressed
- Whether Radio 5 live's image as a sports channel puts off some people who may be interested in its distinctive news and current affairs offer
- Whether there are any enduring changes in audience perceptions of BBC impartiality in news and current affairs coverage, in response to a changing UK (as for network news and current affairs generally)

## **The main themes of feedback are noted below:**

**Value of sport on the radio:** Listeners valued sports coverage on the radio platform, where it is accessible on the move (especially in the car) and alongside other activities. There was warm recognition of the unique qualities of sports commentary on radio:

*"Radio commentary is totally different from TV ... there can be no breaks, everything has to be described and that can make it feel more immediate, as if you are right there."*

This connection was further demonstrated by some of the ways that audiences consumed the service, for instance listening to 5 live commentary alongside live TV pictures. For one group the quality of the 5 live commentary was most clearly, and deservedly, recognised when Match of the Day used Alan Green's radio commentary against its own footage – a creative use of an exceptional resource.

**Younger audiences:** We were struck, however, by the extent to which many younger sports fans, in their teens and twenties, did not tune into Radio 5 live at all. They reported a very low level of awareness of the station within their social circles. These groups tended not to seek out any speech radio services, whether commercial or BBC. They had a strong preference for watching sports events rather than listening to radio coverage – and for many Sky Sports provided all they wanted. Some reported using other media services for results eg social media, but if they wanted coverage of the event itself they would wait until they got home to see it live or recorded. They also said they would never think to listen to MW:

*"In the car I tend to flick through the FM channels. It would never occur to me to search on MW."*

*"My kids don't understand why I would listen to a station that crackles and buzzes – they would just switch over on that basis alone."*

Portstewart, September 2014

*"MW is a disaster here. I only listen to Radio 5 live after midnight on the Radio Ulster frequency."*

Ballymoney and Dalriada Probus Groups, May 2014

Some of these younger audiences thought that the service could be of interest, but they had simply not been made aware of it:

*"It's never been promoted to me. Radio Ulster, on the other hand, is ingrained because it's what my parents listen to."*

The Council believes it is very important that the Trust's review explores the impact of changes in media consumption, especially among younger groups, and considers how this will impact on future audiences for Radio 5 live.

**Sports commentary:** The quality of sports commentary, including the contribution of pundits, was generally considered to be very high and a mark of distinction for the service, with many individuals having their own favourites.

*"Sports commentary on Radio 5 live and sports extra is first rate. Their visualisation of what's happening is excellent."*

The credibility of presenters, commentators and pundits is of central importance to this critical audience: they prize knowledge (incl. good technical knowledge), passion, high quality

analysis, and connection with listeners above all, and do not want this to be compromised, for instance by introducing more celebrity contributors with less relevant expertise.

Many listeners could point to examples of excellence, and ways this was demonstrated, for instance through breadth of knowledge and interest across different sports:

*"Formula 1 is covered very well on Radio 5 live, even though you have only half the rights. I like the way the commentators talk about other sports in the background."*

Men's hockey club, Belfast, October 2014

Some people thought there was a need to keep replenishing the range of voices, although this was feedback captured before the presenter changes in October. There was a particular interest in hearing more female voices - see below. However, there was a strong consensus that any new presenters had to be credible and maintain the standards that 5 live audiences expect.

**Distinctiveness:** A significant section of the audience we spoke with thought that 5 live has a distinctive – and much better – offer than talkSPORT. They thought that Radio 5 live offered better quality programmes, higher production values and more informed commentary and analysis. The lack of adverts on the BBC station was highly prized, particularly for sports events. There was a common perception amongst these listeners that talkSport was more 'tabloid', targeted to a very specific segment, and less informed about sport.

*"Radio 5 live has classier productions and no adverts."*

We are mindful, however, that we spoke primarily to 5 live listeners, and think it would be helpful for the Trust to understand more about the audiences for the two services, and any distinctions that they perceive between the two offers.

**Range of formats:** There was positive feedback on the range and balance of different types of sports programmes. Listeners thought that this contributed to the station's distinctiveness. Live coverage was central:

*"The station has live coverage – that's what you want. It's exciting."*

Portstewart, September 2014

Listeners also valued the wider range of formats eg sports documentaries, results programmes, analysis and discussion formats. Sport-related humour, such as *Fighting Talk*, also appealed to many, and was recognised as evidence of the breadth of the offer.

**Involving the audience:** Phone-ins tended to split the audience. Many listeners were very enthusiastic about the added value they brought in terms of engaging audiences and extending the range of voices and views :

*"Phone-ins can add value, for instance at half time when there is time for a wide range of voices. You hear thoughts you might have had yourself articulated."*

*"606 brings out some of the passion of sports fans. It adds interest, especially because the commentators tend to be more politically correct or bland in their views."*

Portstewart, September 2014

*"I've heard 10 year olds phoning in, and people phoning in from everywhere."*

Community Service Volunteers media trainees

Others found phone-ins more trivial than studio commentary and discussion and would prefer to avoid them.

However, there was a general consensus that Radio 5 live was good at involving its audiences, whether through phone-ins or other means such as social media. Overall, the Audience Council thinks that the station should continue to build on this strength, mindful of the various ways that different sections of the audience want to be involved, or just listen.

**Reflecting different audiences:** We also noted a perception among some audiences that the station caters primarily for men, or seems 'blokey' in its tone and approach. It would be useful to understand more about what informs this perception and how widespread it is.

Some people we spoke with thought that this could be addressed by more coverage of women's sports and more female presenters and pundits:

*"I would like to hear more female presenters – to represent me and make me feel that sport is less male dominated."*

It was also suggested that a male skew was perpetuated by an overreliance on former players, whereas female contributors with the right knowledge could be very effective in connecting with the audience:

*"You need to have expertise in a sport and credibility to make valuable comments, but that doesn't mean it has to be someone who played the sport. Clare Balding is very good. You've got to be in touch with your listenership."*

Ulster Academy of Sport, October 2014

**Range of sports:** Some people expressed the view that BBC sports coverage, overall, focused predominantly on mainstream, high profile performance sports with a disparity in the level of coverage for some sports vis-à-vis levels of participation and public interest – e.g. badminton/netball.

Many people we spoke with, however, thought that the range of sports covered on Radio 5 live was reasonable and that football is a particularly important part of the mix.

*"I have no real concerns about the range of sports covered. Stories are created around the cycle of sport. If a sport is happening, it seems to be covered."*

Ulster Academy of Sport, October 2014

A significant proportion thought that, whilst the main focus should still be on major sports, there was still scope within an extensive schedule to stretch the range of sports further. There was particular interest in enhanced coverage of women's sport (from audiences of both sexes), minority sports and sports with a strong amateur following, such as hockey.

This was compounded by a perception that these sports were not well reflected by the media generally and were somewhat neglected by the BBC across its other services eg online, and on the red button, where there had been a reduction in the number of live streams. Whilst the Olympics and Commonwealth Games coverage had ensured a wider range of sports was covered for a time, this was not always achieved in the best way:

*"It can seem like a filler. So the first set of a badminton match is shown and then the BBC moves back to one of the main sports, without showing the rest of the match. If you can't cover the full match it would be better to cover the later stages with an appropriate introduction."* Ulster Academy of Sport, October 2014

Listeners did not seem to be asking for a significant change in the overall balance of sports covered, but there was a clear sense that real value could be added in some relatively small ways eg increased coverage of key women's sports events, a well-publicised 'go to' slot for minority sports, a wider range of sports reflected in discussions and results etc. A number of listeners also expressed an appetite for coverage of international sports. Some people thought that sports extra could be used to cover a broader range of sport, although others were sceptical about widening the remit for a DAB-only station that they cannot listen to in convenient ways. Some suggested extending the hours of Radio 5 live whilst others suggested that online could provide a platform to extend the range of coverage. There was also a view that online could offer an opportunity to explore audiences' interest in less-well covered sports with the potential to grow coverage where there was evidence of audience demand.

The Council asks the Trust to monitor the range of sports covered, and consider whether this has improved since the Trust's last review. It would also be interested to understand what evidence there is of an appetite for a greater range of sports and, if so, how audiences would like this to be achieved and what the likely impact on listening would be. Might there, for example, be opportunities for some coverage of international sports working with the BBC World Service.

Whilst it is important to understand the impact that any minor rebalancing might have on audiences for core sports, the Council believes that there should be a focus on delivering the BBC's distinctive public service in creative ways that serve different sections of the audience and also provide opportunities for core audiences to broaden their interests and knowledge.

**Coverage of teams and events around the UK:** The Audience Council recognises that sports fans in Northern Ireland are served on radio by Radio Ulster/Foyle as well as Radio 5 live, and that the network station will invariably focus on sports that have a UK-wide appeal. However, some listeners thought that 5 Live focused too much on England teams in its coverage of these sports. For example, there is disappointment that Guinness Pro 12 rugby involving teams from NI, Scotland and Wales, has been much less prominent on 5 live and BBC Sport online than the Aviva Premiership, the English clubs' league. The listeners we spoke with expected the station to fulfil its commitment to appeal to sports fans across the UK primarily through content, although it is also helpful to have a range of local accents. The Audience Council suggests that the Trust review might explore how well audiences think the station meets this aspect of its remit, and how they would like it to be achieved.

In this context, a nations-to-network approach and the sharing of local content may have the potential to offer some opportunities across network services, including Radio 5 live.

**Public purposes:** Some expressed an appetite for more sports programming, in general, that explored sport in a wider societal and grass-roots context. As well as enriching content for audiences through a diverse range of sports coverage, some highlighted the educational value of - and appetite for - programming that explored the challenges and triumphs of sport, as well as human interest stories that can help to illustrate the positive contribution of sport at community and society level - such as the benefits for general physical and mental health. Others commented on the value, particularly at community level, of content that makes and highlights connections between achievements in sport at the high end of the spectrum and the sport at amateur/club level.

BBC coverage of minority and amateur sports was also viewed by some to be invaluable in helping to raise the profile of these sports, and stimulating public interest and participation. Some believed that the BBC had a responsibility, under its public service remit, to provide coverage of minority and amateur sports for this purpose.

**News and current affairs coverage:** People we spoke with consider Radio 5 live to be first and foremost a sports station, and that is usually the reason they tune in. Audiences were invariably surprised to learn that 75 % of the station's output is news and current affairs. The Audience Council asks if this means that some people who are not interested in sport miss out on a distinctive approach to news and current affairs that would otherwise appeal to them. For example, we heard from some members of the audience who only discovered the appeal of 5 live by listening to the station overnight, as Radio Ulster's sustaining service.

Whilst most listeners appear to turn to the station for sport, they also appreciated the news and current affairs coverage. Listeners thought that it exhibited all the hallmarks they expect of BBC news – relying on it to provide high quality coverage of all the significant stories and issues in an impartial, accurate way. The distinctive style appears to suit the audience and none of the people we spoke to preferred to turn to other services for UK-wide news and current affairs:

*"I've never had to turn Radio 5 live off for the news. With the BBC all news is legitimate. It's never trivial and it provides what you want from radio."*  
Men's hockey club, Belfast, October 2014

The focus on breaking and rolling news was appreciated, and particularly valuable on smartphones. There were a number of listeners, however, who felt that there was *"too much"* news on the station, with an appetite for more sport and less news. Some people thought there was too much repetition throughout the day whilst others saw this as the nature of rolling news, and there were some who felt that the news was focused *"too much on Westminster"*. Reflecting the changing nature of the UK in network news coverage, in general, is becoming increasingly important in a maturing devolved environment. Audiences' interest in the leaders' elections debates, for example, illustrates the impact of the nations and regions on the wider UK political landscape.

*Wake Up To Money* was valued, although listeners did find the origination was on very early and some thought there could be more business coverage across speech radio generally.

**5 live sports extra:** There was a low level of awareness of Radio 5 live sports extra among the people we spoke with. Those who listened regularly to Radio 5 live were aware of the station but very few listened because it was a digital only station. We are aware that around 15 % of NI households cannot receive a DAB signal, and that take up is low relative to the UK as a whole. It was interesting to hear that even listeners in areas with good DAB coverage cited a range of other obstacles including the cost of replacing their radios, lack of availability in the car, and lack of awareness of what DAB offered. The radio app, while valued by some, was often not considered a suitable alternative to a DAB set because of consumption preferences, broadband and 3G availability and costs (see paragraph on online services below).

As a result, some listeners were frustrated that they could not access the additional service and they would prefer the BBC to focus its output on more universally services rather than develop sports extra further:

*"I listen in the car in analogue. So when I hear that the coverage will continue on 5 live sports extra that's it for me – my listening's over."*  
Ulster Academy of Sport, October 2014

Looking across network speech radio, the Audience Council believes that some of the other areas which it has flagged up in this paper would be better areas for investment (or

protection), at a time of resource constraint. It would be useful to understand the range of perspectives and how the Trust would weigh these in light of the BBC's Public Purposes.

For the few who did listen to the digital service, the coverage was of a similar quality to Radio 5 live and met their expectations.

**Online/digital offer:** Not many people we spoke with used the stations' website or social media feeds, but for a few the information and services like text commentary were a helpful addition to their listening. It would be useful to understand whether more value could be derived from the online/digital services, and if they are developing at the pace and in the way that audiences expect, bearing in mind changes in consumption patterns.

**Promotion of content:** The need for the BBC to promote and raise public awareness of its programming and content is a consistent theme in audience feedback. A number of listeners highlighted the importance of packaging and promoting sports content, and exploiting opportunities to promote content such as linking features and sports reports on sports websites/pages and using social media to highlight sports coverage.

**Value for money:** A number of listeners expressed views, and some concerns, about value for money in relation to sports presenter and pundit remuneration, sports rights costs and the costs of covering major international sports events abroad. In the context of challenges presented by relatively high costs in these areas, largely driven by commercial markets, there was a suggestion that the BBC place more emphasis on other e.g. minority/amateur sports, toward the delivery of its public purposes and value for money objectives.

#### **4. Evidence Base**

The Audience Council engagement activities have included : members of the public and representatives of local organisations from Coleraine/Portstewart and Armagh areas; members and staff from the Linen Hall Library in Belfast as well as a group of visually impaired people who meet there; a men's hockey club in Belfast; masters journalism students at the University of Ulster in Coleraine; staff, post graduate and undergraduate students at the Ulster Academy of Sport, University of Ulster at Jordanstown; CSV media trainees; members of two men's Probus groups in Ballymoney; and a ladies' Probus group in Belfast; students from NW Regional College; Lecale and Downe Historical Society and Friends of Down County Museum. A number of these organisations drew their membership from across NI, and sometimes beyond.

Together these groups reflected a wide diversity of views and interests, from older groups who have listened to Radio 4 for decades and those in the target age range who listen more occasionally or not at all. We heard from younger audiences in their teens and twenties and those in the replinisher category. We listened to people with an interest in a wide range of sports, including those actively involved at all levels, and drawing on wide networks. The Council also met with representatives from sports governing bodies, public and voluntary sector organisations.

The Council has also drawn on its wider programme of audience engagement and members' own networks to inform its advice to the Trust.

*BBC Audience Council NI, March 2015*